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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with a discourse-based approach to lexis and, in particular, the discourse role of lexical patterns or lexicalized sequences which are completely or partially preassembled and more or less fixed in form. Lexical patterns, their function in a community's codes, and the cultural differences that may arise in their use, are briefly discussed. The relationship of lexical patterns to social competence and to two general discourse strategies, framing and symbolizing, is described. Lastly, the latent, pragmatic nature of lexical patterns is addressed. (Author/JP)

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Lexis in discourse

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with a discourse-based approach to lexis and, in particular, the discourse role of lexical patterns or lexicalized sequences which are completely or partially pre-assembled and more or less fixed in form. The paper discusses, briefly, the description of such patterns, their function in a community's codes and the cultural differences that may arise in their use. Lexical patterns are related to social competence and two general discourse strategies, called framing and symbolizing, and, lastly, the latent, pragmatic nature of the patterns is briefly touched upon. The examples are mainly from spoken discourse but it is believed that the findings would also be applicable to written data.

1. Introduction

It is assumed in this paper that communicative competence is, to a large extent, the ability to make use of *lexical patterns*. These are lexicalized sequences of phrase- or clause-length or even longer, completely or partially ready-made and more or less fixed in form. It seems that knowledge of such patterns greatly facilitates idiomatic lexical choice, as well as the production of fluent and coherent discourse.

It also seems that lexical patterns are used to encode meanings and organize discourse in accordance with contextual constraints and culture-specific norms. The norms have to do with pragmatic principles such as politeness and the interest principle. Adherence to norms of this kind in communicative behaviour is a feature of *social competence* (Edmondson, 1981).

1. Lexical patterns

1.1.

In lexicography, lexical patterns are dealt with under such headings, for instance, as 'collocation' and 'fixed expression' (e.g. Jackson, 1988). *Collocation* is said to refer to a combination of words that have a certain mutual expectancy, e.g. 'a good read'. The combination is not fixed, however, compared with a *cliché*, such as 'a desirable residence' (found in estate agents' advertisements), a *proverb* like 'You can't win them all', or an *idiom* such as 'storm in a teacup'.

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1.2.

A somewhat different approach to lexical patterns is taken in Pawley and Syder (1983). Their starting point is the observation that

> Human capacities for encoding novel speech in advance or while speaking appear to be severely limited, yet speakers commonly produce fluent multi-clause utterances which exceed these limits. (Pawley and Syder 1983:191)

How can such fluent and idiomatic control of a language, characteristic of the discourse of native speakers, best be explained?

According to Pawley and Syder, the control rests, to a considerable extent, on knowledge of a body of 'lexicalized sentence stems'. Lexicalized sentence stems, which range from completely ready-made expressions to mere schemata, are said to consist of

> units of clause length or longer whose grammatical form and lexical content is wholly or largely fixed; the fixed elements form a standard label for a culturally recognized concept, a term in the language. (Ibid.)

It is to be noted that such lexicalized sequences are regarded as *lexical items* in their own right, in the same way as individua! words. The fixed expression (ie. idiom) 'storm in a teacup' may again be cited as an example. In this case the combination is wholly fixed; for instance, it is not possible to make either of the two nouns plural (cf. *'storms in a teacup', *'a storm in teacups').

2. Community Codes

The second point about lexicalized sequences is that each constitutes a 'culturally recognized concept', a kind of cultural term. Thus the phrase 'storm in a teacup' is a cultural term used, in colloquial English, as a handy way of describing some incident, non-literally, concisely and suggestively. As such a cultural term, the phrase is a living part of what may be called a *community code*. Loveday writes about such formulaic sequences, and their relation to a community's code, as follows:

> When speakers employ such formulae, they draw upon the community's resources and demonstrate recognizable familiarity with and loyalty to the community's code and implicitly to its values, since the petrified forms relate and refer to a special, historically given social framework. Adherence to this framework is expressed and partly achieved in the employment of formulae which, in turn, contributes to an affirmation of the social order which is metaphorically alluded to in the uses of the formulae. (Loveday 1982: 83)

3. Cultural Differences

3.1.

For someone unfamiliar with the 'special, historically given social framework' it may be difficult, at least in the beginning, to adjust to the code(s) of the host community. There is a good description of such 'life in a new language' in the autobiography of Eva Hoffman (*Lost in Translation*. London: Heinemann, 1989). She knew no English when she went to Canada (and later the U.S.) from Poland as a thirteen-year-old. At one point in the book she writes :

> Every day I learn new words, new expressions. I pick them up from school exercises, from conversations, from the books I take out of Vancouver's well-lit, cheerful public library. *There are some turns of phrase to which I develop strange allergies. 'You're welcome', for example, strikes me as a gaucherie, and I can hardly bring myself to say it - I suppose because it implies that there is something to be thanked for, which in Polish would be impolite.* The very places where language is at its most conventional, where it should be most taken for granted, are the places where I feel the prick of artifice. (Hoffman 1989:106, emphasis added.)

3.2.

What is regarded as polite, or impolite, is clearly culturally variable. There may in fact be considerable differences between the 'politeness codes' of different communities, even within the same nation. This makes it difficult for a non-native to participate in culture-bound speech events, such as informal conversation or banter, or the telling of stories and jokes. For a person who is not familiar with the culture-specific interpersonal codes involved in such events, it can be difficult to acquire the kind of ease, control and self-assurance that are necessary for the various discourse skills - such as initiating a discourse, elaborating and responding, signalling an opening or closing, indicating 'this is funny' or 'this is the punch line'- in sum, all those skills that have to do with 'symbolizing' meanings appropriately and 'framing' one's discourse in a way which is culturally acceptable (Loveday, 1982).

4. Lexical Patterns as a coding principle

Lexical patterns, i.e. lexicalized sequences of all kinds, are perhaps the main element in community codes, and lexicalization, in this sense, perhaps the main coding principle.

We have already touched upon the facilitative function of pre-coded sequences, the fact that they make it easier to handle connected, ongoing discourse. At the same time, the pre-patterned sequences help speakers, in interactional situations, to cope

with the contextual and culture-specific demands of interpersonal rhetoric, ie. maxims such as 'be co-operative, 'be supportive', 'be polite' and 'be interesting' (Leech, 1983). Social competence in a language is not just a matter of fluency; it is also a matter of possessing the necessary discourse skills and the ability to project politeness and other aspects of interpersonal rhetoric into the time dimension of ongoing discourse. This is where lexical patterns are such an indispensable resource.

5. Symbolizing and framing as discourse strategies

5.1.

Lexicalized patterns (or formulae, in Loveday's term) fulfil the requirements of social competence in two basic respects. First, they are functionally adapted to the job of *symbolizing*, or encoding meanings in accordance with contextual requirements and culture-specific community norms. Secondly, the patterns help speakers to handle *framing*, ie. discourse organization and matters such as self-presentation (in terms of face, etc.).

Framing and symbolizing are best understood as general *discourse strategies* whose function is to make the interaction successful, both transactionally and interpersonally.

In this connection, Loveday (1982:83) talks about 'formulistic competence'; those speakers who do not possess formulistic competence

> can be interpreted not only as lacking in politeness and sophistication but also as incompletely socialized.

5.2.

All symbolizing patterns are more or less formulaic and idiomatic. Their idiomatic nature can be studied, for instance, by investigating the *softening devices* employed by speakers. A socially competent speaker of English is able to use lexical patterns flexibly for the purpose of softening - combining one pattern with another, modifying a pattern if necessary, and stringing patterns together as and when required, to form a complex 'speech act set', as in the following polite invitation:

(1)

> Well, what I was wondering was if you'd like to join me for a drink at the Ferryboat. It's just a stroll from here.

Here even the propositional content of the invitation is expressed by means of a lexical pattern, a polite cliché: 'join me for a drink'. This pattern is both preceded and followed by softening items, ie. lexical patterns which symbolize such discourse

meanings as 'tentativeness' ('Well, what I was wondering...') and a 'sweetener' ('It's just a stroll from here').

5.3.

Calling the speaking turn a *speech act set* alludes to the other aspect of the coding, namely the aspect of self-presentation and discourse organization - in a word, framing. Both conventions, framing as well as symbolizing, function in unison - helping to clarify sense, modifying each other and accommodating to the context, ie. setting, stage and topic of discourse, background knowledge, definition of the activity, and participants' roles and relations.

5.4.

Framing, in particular, has to do with such matters as quantity of speech deemed necessary or appropriate in a particular context; its timing, chunking and sequencing; treatment of topic, etc. Obviously the choice of a framing strategy always depends on the speaker's own individual assessment of the context, as well as his or her willingness to comply with all the culture-specific norms.

In the example, the (male) performer of the act of invitation and the (female) recipient represent a section of British middle class. They have only just met and know little of each other. The invitation concerns a further social activity which could ultimately cause them to become more intimately involved with each other. The man is anxious to achieve his aim but has little idea of how his partner is going to react, etc. These are among the contextual determinants affecting the framing in this case, in terms of turn-length and complexity and sequencing of the constituent acts.

The decisions made on the metalinguistic level of framing have repercussions on the linguistic level of symbolizing, affecting the choice of the lexical patterns, such as those used for softening.

6. Some functions of lexical patterns in discourse

6.1.

It has already been pointed out that framing and symbolizing, although separable in theory, in practice work in unison. While symbolizing has to do with culturally and situationally appropriate encoding of meanings, framing is concerned with the management of face and the structuring of discourse. The reason why lexical patterns are so useful is the fact that they can conveniently combine both aspects, symbolizing as well as framing, even within the same utterance.

Thus such a preface as 'Oh, I was wondering if you could...' is a framing strategy communicating such meanings as 'I know I'm interrupting', 'this is the boundary of a transaction', and 'this is going to be a request'. Simultaneously as an act of symbolizing the phrase is clearly a conventional formula functioning as a polite softening device.

6.2.

It is well-known that there are lexical sequences which occur commonly as framings, e.g.

(2)

If you ask me...
To be honest...
Tell you what...
There's another thing...
Look, I have an idea...
If it's not too personal a question...
All right, let's get down to business, etc.

Polite conversation obviously depends on the proper use of such framing devices, for the purpose of mitigation, for instance, or for coherence, for decreasing distance and increasing rapport, etc.

Sometimes even complete utterances function as lexical patterns used for framing purposes, e.g.'I wasn't trying to insult you', or 'It was just an example'. Other sequences do their job more indirectly - compare, for example, 'I'm expecting a client', used as a pre-closing to forewarn the hearer of the speaker's wish to end the encounter.

6.3.

Some patterns are used for symbolizing as *propositional* elements, encoding an *ideational* meaning. As Leech (1983: 146) points out, there is a pragmatic 'interest principle' by which discourse which is interesting (witty, funny, amusing, etc.) is preferred to discourse that is boring and predictable. This principle favours the choice of lexical patterns known as 'figures of speech' for the expression of propositions. The oft-cited 'storm in a teacup' is one example.

Like the other pragmatic principles, the interest principle tends to be differently valued in different cultural communities: some prefer literal, matter-of-fact truthfulness in situations where some other communities would be inclined to favour a high degree of rhetorical embroidery, e.g. in the form of exaggeration. In the following extract a British businesswoman discusses (in writing) a typical day of hers,

using idiomatic lexical patterns of colloquial English for the purpose of rhetorical embroidery:

(3)

> After lunch there are meetings and *a constant flow* of herbal tea...*There's always a mountain of* paper wherever I am...*There's a pile of* books by the bed... We both *make a real effort to* find time on our own... *I know I wasn't put on this earth to* unblock loos... I took to walking around Harvey Nichols, which *cost me a fortune*...Being away from everything *is heaven...The dice are loaded against* any woman trying to combine this sort of work with a family.

7. Latent patterning

It is an important feature of some lexical sequences that they function in discourse as 'latent' patterns (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975). *Latent* patterns, and the discourse functions of such patterns, are not necessarily recognized in grammatical descriptions concerned only with referential meanings. In the above passage the collocations, such as 'a mountain of paper' and 'a pile of books', are latent patterns in their metaphorical readings. In 'I *was* wondering if...' the past tense is not to be taken literally either but as a latent pattern symbolizing politeness.

It is knowledge of latent lexical patterning that perhaps more than anything else sets a native speaker apart from non-natives. The fact that stereotypic lexical sequences, such as the sentence stems of Pawley and Syder, exist as cultural terms, means that they can be an effective barrier and one that is cultural as well as linguistic. Eva Hoffman was intuitively aware of this barrier when such a conventional phrase as 'You're welcome' struck her as a gaucherie. It is possible that Eva, as a non-native, took this phrase too seriously, reading too much into it. It would have been possible to disregard the 'impolite' implications of the expression and treat it as just a friendly gesture, a gracious but basically meaningless acknowledgement of thanks received. After all, something like this is what the phrase amounts to as a latent pattern, as an element of the community code in question.

8. Conclusion

It has not been possible, in this short paper, to touch upon more than only a few aspects of lexis in discourse, namely lexical patterning and its role in culturally and contextually appropriate communication. Lexical patterns, especially those which are here called latent, remain a field which needs much more investigation, theoretical as well as empirical. Such investigation promises to provide a key to other cultures, and

to the ways they encode meanings and structure discourse. In the long term, this in turn promises to help avoid misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication.

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